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# Opinion • Commentary

## Counting Assets in the CIA

**W**ATERGATE reporter Carl Bernstein has claimed that the CIA used roughly 400 American journalists in the past. The New York Times claims that about a tenth that number would be nearer the truth. Who is right?

Both are, I suppose. The Times is talking about journalists who consciously ran some kind of errand for

By Garry Wills

the Agency. But agents love to talk more vaguely about their "assets" in the press, no doubt exaggerating the number just as our "body counts" in Vietnam were exaggerated by those wanting to take credit for running an efficient death shop.

Some of the large number provided by Mr. Bernstein was made up, no doubt, of journalists being used without realizing it.

But a larger number probably had a drink or dinner with an agent, swapped rumors, and parted with neither of them the wiser. The agent would still count this a contact with his "assets" for the same reason a businessman writes off lunch with a "client" who does not buy anything.

Still, the Bernstein number is important. It shows how much waste and silliness are involved in the work of an agency with large (and yet secret) funds to be used (and used up).

The bureaucratic waste and wheel-spinning of the FBI are coming to light, now, as dossiers are released to their subjects under the Freedom of Information Act.

Agents seem to have done a great deal of "work" for want of anything better to fill their time. Yet filling time with silly errands, and using up the budget, was important to an empire-builder like J. Edgar Hoover.

It is even more important, and less scrutinized, than the actions of the CIA. The CIA is the only American agency created in conscious defiance of the Constitution's provision that all public money must be accounted for.

The Bernstein number, put together with many other things, shows the result of this secret largess. Available money gets spent in monkey-business, some harmful, some silly, some major, most minor—as the Nixon crew demonstrated in 1972. We learned that Nixon's gumshoes would do just about anything because they had the heady feeling they could afford to do just about everything. And that is one of the CIA's many problems.

On the morals of CIA-press relations, I think some journalists come off worse than the CIA itself.

It is quite true that no government agency should try to suborn the press. But it is naive to think most agencies will not try to, at some point or other.

Why should we expect a more delicate conscience in the CIA or FBI than we have found in the Justice Department or HEW? They all want a good and useful press. They all use flattery, leaks, and preferential treatment, to help ensure it—not outright bribes, perhaps, but neither were most CIA offers outright bribes.

The seduced press cannot plead, in extenuation, that there are seducers in the world—of course there are. The seducers are there to be resisted. The press, for two decades, resisted the CIA poorly when it was not begging to be ravished. Improvement in this area is more a matter of press reform than of CIA reform.

Of course, there will always be "free-lancers" (often a fancy term for the unemployed) willing to do the CIA's fishy work for pay. But they are of limited usefulness. It is the reputable press the CIA most wanted to use; and it is the job of good editors to insist on this in dealing with the CIA as well as the White House.

Attempts to prevent the trading of information between agents and journalists are affronts to freedom. How does one cover people one cannot talk to?

The fault in the past was not in covering the CIA, but in refusing to cover it, and in covering up for it. The relationship of the press to policemen and politicians should be one of a friendly adversary, with valid interests that sometimes conflict with equally valid interests in the office holders.

The same should apply to the CIA. What, after all, are its agents but political policemen, to be watched with double caution, from as close up as we can get?